

TOBIN RANGE WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 13,107 acres

The Tobin Range WSA (NV-020-406Q) is located in eastern Pershing County, about 40 miles south of Winnemucca, Nevada. The WSA includes 13,107 acres of public lands and surrounds 120 acres of private lands. The study area uses Grass Valley Road as its western boundary, Bushee Creek Road for its southern boundary, section lines and the ridgecrest of the Tobin Range for the eastern boundary and section lines and private lands for the northern boundary.

The Tobin Range WSA measures about 6 miles north-south and varies from 2 to 5 miles east-west. It rises from the edge of the valley floor to the crest of the Tobin Range, with elevations ranging from 4,640 feet to 9,775 feet. Within the WSA are three distinct landforms: the high elevation adjacent to Mt. Tobin, the lower foothills within the Tobin Range, and the fringing desert piedmont.

The upper elevations (7,000 - 9,700 feet) are characterized by smooth, dominant ridges separated by shallow drainages. The foothill section has roughly parallel (east-west) deeply-cut drainages and several dominant rock outcrops and is bounded on the west by a prominent fault scarp 10 to 20 feet high, formed in 1915. This fault was exposed during a major earthquake. The lowest section, the fringing desert piedmont, is a gently sloping alluvial fan on the east side of Pleasant Valley, with several parallel, east-west drainages separated by low ridges.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE

The recommendation for this WSA is to release all 13,107 acres for uses other than wilderness.

For this WSA, management emphasizing access to potential mineral resources was selected over management as designated wilderness due to energy and mineral resource potential. Pre-FLPMA (1976) mining claims and geothermal leases encompass approximately 43 percent of the area. It is not possible to exclude the areas containing mining claims (500 acres) without seriously impairing wilderness manageability. In addition, the area(s) of the WSA which contains the highest mineral potential generally correspond to the area(s) with the highest wilderness values (3,600 acres). If these claims are developed, and it is very probable that they will be, the areas with some of the highest wilderness values would lose those values.

It is projected that short-term metallic mineral interest within the WSA is likely. This interest would result in tungsten, mercury and barite exploration consisting of cross-country travel, one mile of drill roads, and dozer trenches and cuts disturbing five acres. It is also projected that a 10 acre gravel pit with 1/2 mile of access road would also be developed. Although geothermal exploration has decreased, proposed developments are increasing in the surrounding area. Exploration would consist of cross-country travel, small drill sites and an access road disturbing approximately 5 acres. Oil and gas exploration is expected to continue at the present level. This exploration would involve cross country travel, a well pad and 1/2 mile of access road for a total disturbance of 15 acres.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The Tobin Range is primarily natural, with most of the WSA's high country having virtually no development. The upper elevations (7,000 - 9,700 feet) are characterized by smooth, dominant ridges separated by shallow drainages. The foothill section has roughly parallel (east-west) deeply-cut drainages

and several dominant rock outcrops and is bounded on the west by a prominent fault scarp 10 to 20 feet high, formed in 1915. The lowest section, the fringing desert piedmont, is a gently sloping alluvial fan on the east side of Pleasant Valley, with several parallel, east-west drainages separated by low ridges.

Two fences (totalling 1.25 miles) and one developed spring are the only range developments in the WSA's one grazing allotment. Other human imprints within the WSA are the six ways totalling 7.8 miles, one abandoned mining prospect in the center of the WSA in Cottonwood Canyon, one abandoned utility line parallel to the west boundary and one gravel pit adjacent to the west boundary road. Two ranches, outside but adjacent to the WSA, are visible from within the unit, as are a county road and several other roads.

B. Solitude: The Tobin Range WSA offers outstanding opportunities for solitude, as a whole. Topographic screening in the high elevation section of the WSA ranges from fair to poor, except in major drainages where it is good. Shrubs provide minimal vegetative screening. In the lower elevations of the Tobin Range, juniper trees and small riparian areas offer good to excellent vegetative screening. Topographic screening is also excellent because of the deeply cut drainages throughout the area. Low shrubs provide minimal vegetative screening in the fringing desert piedmont. There is poor topographic screening due to the flat terrain, however, small drainages do offer localized areas of fair screening. The frequent, low-level military flights reduce the feeling of solitude. Other influences associated with local and seasonal ranching activities are minimal.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: There are excellent opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. Although all areas are within four miles of a road, there is excellent potential for day-hiking, camping, hunting, backpacking, rock scrambling, horse-packing, nature study, cross-country skiing and winter camping. These are especially notable in the higher elevations of the WSA, where excellent views of the surrounding desert enhance the recreation potential.

D. Special Features: The most significant special feature is the easily noticed 1915 fault line that runs north and south along the base of the Tobin Range. This is the best example of such a phenomenon in the Winnemucca District. This fault has been well documented and written up in geologic literature; it is considered to be a text book example.

4. Manageability

The study area is not capable of being managed as wilderness due to manageability problems associated with the 500 acres of pre-FLPMA mining claims and 5,125 acres (39% of WSA) of geothermal leases and one private inholding that is 120 acres in size. The audio and visual intrusions of the development of any of these operations would severely reduce the wilderness characteristics of the area. Access to allow the development and operation of the mining claims and leases would have to be granted which would incorporate new roads into the area.

There would also be management problems associated with the following concerns: 7.8 miles of ways, easy accessibility of ORVs on 31% of the WSA (4,000 acres) and frequent military overflights.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The following conclusions were reached : 2,200 acres rated high for metallic mineral potential (mercury and antimony), 5,200 acres rated moderate for metallic mineral potential (tungsten, copper and mercury), 3,700 acres rated high for nonmetallic mineral potential (fluorspar, barite, sand and gravel), 9,400 acres rated moderate for nonmetallic mineral potential (fluorspar and barite) and 5,100 acres rated moderate for geothermal potential. Based on surrounding current and past metallic mineral exploration/development, short term interest within the Mount Tobin WSA is likely.

As reserves in existing county gravel pits are depleted, an additional 10-acre county pit and associated 1/2-mile access road would likely be developed on the west side of the WSA.

Geothermal exploration has subsided compared to the past, however, proposed developments are increasing in the surrounding areas. This interest would result in geothermal exploration consisting of cross-country travel, small drill sites and 1/2 mile of access roads disturbing five acres along the west side of the WSA.

Oil and gas exploration activities are expected to continue at the current level. This interest would result in further oil and gas geophysical exploration consisting of cross country travel, disturbing five acres along the west side of the WSA. One well pad and 1/2 mile of access road, disturbing 10 acres, would also be on the west side of the study area. Oil and gas drilling activities would have to occur on new leases as none exist at present. Geophysical exploration activities would occur with or without any leases.

There are 500 acres of pre-FLPMA mining claims and 5,125 acres of oil and gas leases in the WSA. There is no present production of any mineral or geothermal resources in the study area.

In summary, quantities of various mineral and energy resources are unknown, but the potential for occurrence is from moderate to high in several portions of the WSA.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC COMMENTS

During the initial and intensive inventory stages (1978-1980) many of the 26 comments discussed characteristics of the area (e.g., intrusions, resources, wilderness qualities) or suggested boundary changes. Reasons given for supporting wilderness study area status were the following: opportunities for solitude, spectacular scenery, naturalness and its special features. Reasons given for opposing wilderness study area status were the following: other resource values, roads, intrusions and lack of outstanding opportunities for solitude. These comments addressed the entire 115,000 acres of the original study area (Tobin Range, 406).

During the 90-day comment period for the Draft Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement, three formal public hearings were held in Nevada (Gerlach on November 1, Winnemucca on November 3 and Reno on November 8, 1983). No oral comments were received that named only the Tobin Range WSA. A total of 11 written comments were received. Five of the comments supported more wilderness than was recommended in the draft wilderness EIS (DEIS). Six of the comments supported the preferred alternative in the DEIS (no wilderness). Most of these comments noted the WSA's potential mineral resources and the low wilderness quality.

Pershing County stated that it wanted to preserve all public lands within the county's boundaries as multiple use areas. The Governor of the State of Nevada concurred with the Bureau's recommendation. The U.S. Air Force said it supported wilderness designation provided no restrictions were placed on military flights. It will work with the BLM if military flights create problems in some areas.

No comments were received on the Final EIS.